

EAVESDROPPING TWITTER: WHAT STUDENTS REALLY THINK ABOUT WRITING CENTERS

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Abstract

In recent decades, writing centers have moved from the margins of campus power toward the center (Essid 2014). Because our connections to professors and administrators have increased, students may be less likely to speak freely during consultations, on surveys, and in focus groups. Where, then, might we hear students' "real talk" about writing centers? In the latter half of July 2015 and the beginning of August, I aimed to find out. My hypothesis was that Twitter might be a space to find "voices that are often left out of our surveys of satisfaction" (Lerner 4). Therefore, I spent a month surveilling Twitter, trying to listen in and access what students say about us when we aren't likely to be listening. I found Twitter to be a public space in which students feel comfortable talking frankly about school matters, including writing center matters.

One of the early rationales for peer-to-peer writing centers was that they might be spaces where students could speak freely to one another about writing assignments. In such spaces, students could articulate ideas that aren't exactly "wholesome": how to exploit loopholes in a professor's syllabus, how to take smart shortcuts when multiple deadlines are approaching, how to subvert assignments that are offensive or clueless, etc. However, in recent decades, this type of collaboration has become less feasible. According to Harry Denny, many writing center practitioners "fear real material consequences if [they] fail to conform or adapt to conventions of pedagogy and performance" (55). Therefore, to secure funding for operations in universities that are focused on "measurable outcomes and fiscal solvency," writing centers increasingly assimilate into the established institution (Essid 1).

As writing centers migrate from the margins of campus power toward the center, their connections to professors and administrators grow. In exchange for associated perks and benefits, writing centers sacrifice some of the freedoms and possibilities they had in the margins. Peter Carino asks if the changing status of writing centers compels them to "speak politely" now (108). In some cases, yes. In the conference reports that tutors send to professors, are they really going to discuss the shortcuts they found and the loopholes they exploited?

Because students also feel the pressure to speak politely, writing center scholars have rightfully

questioned whether we get "real talk" from them on surveys, during appointments, and in focus groups about their experiences in the writing center. For example, a group of Fairfield University tutors, led by Beth Bocquet, articulated this concern in a 2005 article about focus groups.

We also thought that students might be more likely to speak freely to fellow students, rather than to a professor. Using tutors as moderators, however, does not come without its problems. For example, participants might feel uncomfortable talking to someone who might have tutored them in the past or could potentially tutor them in the future. We briefly considered asking someone outside the Writing Center to facilitate the groups (Cushman 4-5).

Cindy Johaneck recommends using a mixed bag of quantitative and qualitative assessment techniques in order to triangulate the data and thereby counter possible biases in collection methods. However, given that some assessments are undertaken in order "to prove the effectiveness of our writing centers to get funding or just to stay in business," one might argue that we aren't always looking for straight answers (Mohr 8).

For students, if there is even a tiny chance that one's answer on a writing center survey will "come back to haunt" them, why take the risk? School spirit? I suppose, but frankly, the smart play is to offer bland, uncontroversial answers. It makes sense to stick to the script. That is often what we get.

If students give bland, uncontroversial answers when approached by assessors of writing centers, that doesn't mean they have no outlet whatsoever for gripes and uncouth statements about writing centers. James Scott has shown that, when a space comes under surveillance, thereby forcing inhabitants to utter prescribed beliefs, those inhabitants always (yes, always) find a new space for unscripted comments.

In the digital age, one of the obvious spaces for unscripted commentary is the Internet. It's a relatively safe space because users can take on pseudonyms and because there are so many dark corners of the Web that the chances are slim that a comment will "come

back to haunt you.” Older authority figures often don’t even know how to access the apps that youngsters use to communicate. To the degree that it is risky, uncouth commentary online is worth the risk, especially if rewards include boosted credibility among peers.

So, what the heck are these youngsters saying about writing centers in the unsupervised spaces of the Web? In the latter half of July 2015 and the beginning of August, I aimed to find out. My method was simple. Within Twitter, I searched for “writing center” and transcribed all peer-to-peer commentary on university writing centers. Because I was looking only for peer-to-peer commentary, I ignored all of the tweets by administrators advertising writing center services and all of the tweets by students reaching out to professors (“@ProfessorGilbride how many times do we have to go 2 writing center?”).

My hypothesis was that Twitter might be a space to find “voices that are often left out of our surveys of satisfaction” and, in fact, I found Twitter to be a public space in which students feel comfortable talking frankly about school matters, including writing center matters (Lerner 4). Therefore, I spent a month surveilling Twitter, trying to listen in and access what students say about us when we aren’t likely to be listening. At the end of this essay, I offer brief recommendations for writing center recruitment practices, based on what I learned from my month of surveillance.

They Like Us. They Really Like Us.

One of the first things you notice while eavesdropping on Twitter is that many students love the writing center. We already know this from the students who rush into our writing centers after getting a great grade and from impromptu conversations with regulars. But since the rest of this essay portrays some negativity, let me begin with a few nice comments. These do a decent job of representing the positive vibes on Twitter:

- Every time I leave the writing center I feel so much more motivated with my papers¹
- Writing center is actually helpful
- So thankful that ELAC has a writing center or else I'll be struggling with my essay.
- This writing center is so helpful 😊
- So I went to the writing center and actually had my mind blown. My thesis

and purpose is so much clearer now.
#english2010

Cool. But what do students say when things don’t go so swimmingly? Here are a few examples:

- PROTIP for kids at poverty tier colleges (and colleges in general) The writing center is a load of shit. Don't bother they won't help you.
- when will professors realize the writing center is a pointless waste of time

In general, the negative tweets were not as angry as these and usually more interesting too. Furthermore, they often hovered around topics that writing center professionals care about, like originality, collaboration, and credit.

Of Diss Tracks & Ghostwriters

The month I tracked Twitter comments about writing centers happened to be the month in which some beef played out between hip-hop stars Drake and Meek Mill. I wouldn’t normally expect hip-hop concerns to intersect with writing center concerns, but this was a feud that hovered, from the start, around writing, originality, collaboration, and credit—all issues that writing centers deal with on a daily basis. And to my *great* surprise, several tweeters *directly* referenced writing centers as they weighed in on Meek/Drake.

To give a little background, the drama between Meek and Drake likely stems from competition for the affection of Nicki Minaj, but it really surfaced online when Meek Mill got tired of people comparing his music to Drake’s music. On July 21st, in the tweet that sparked everything, Meek referenced rumors that Drake hires ghostwriters to generate his rhymes. “Stop comparing drake to me,” Meek wrote. “He don't write his own raps! That's why he ain't tweet my album because we found out!” (Ramirez). Meek elaborated on July 26th, saying, “If you gonna be the motherfuckin' greatest of this shit just make sure you're doing your motherfuckin' pen game, and keep it all the way a motherfuckin' hundred” (Ramirez). Meek piled on the ridicule by releasing an image of Drake’s face hastily photoshopped onto the body of Milli Vanilli (Ramirez).

Meek’s words and images inspired legions of Drake haters online, but one Drake supporter rose to his defense on Twitter, noting the hypocrisy of several critics:

- Yall mad at drake for ghostwriting. But begging the writing center at your college campus for input to pass a test...stop me if im crazy

Overall, the feud was short-lived and mild compared to other celebrity feuds. According to Erika Ramirez of *Billboard*, it played out like this:

- On July 28th, Drake responded to Meek's ridicule by issuing a very well received diss track called "Back to Back." In it, Drake mocks Meek for taking a subordinate role in Nicki Minaj's Pinkprint Tour. Drake raps, "Is that a world tour, or your girl's tour?" By the time the track reaches wide circulation, Drake has easily taken the lead in this feud.
- Everyone waits for Meek Mill to respond with a diss track of his own. And he does on July 30th. But it's widely viewed to be a dud. According to the gossip site Jezebel.com, "the song has been heretofore rejected on account of mediocrity." One Twitter critic writes, "Meek should've let nicki proofread. You never turn in an essay without a proofread."
- Finally, Drake takes his victory lap, issuing some Instagram photos that go viral. The July 30th photos depict Drake looking at his phone and cracking up, as if to say, "THAT'S all you got, Meek?!"

In the immediate aftermath of Drake's "victory," I came across a flurry of tweets aiming to diss Meek Mill through reference to writing centers:

- Meek shudve took that song 2 the Writing Center first
- Writing Center can help Meek Mill
- Meek Mill went to the writing center to have diss song proof read!
- Took them to the writing center RT @TheRealSchitty: Meek Mills writing his bars and checking them twice.
- he should have went to the Writing Center. he needed a little more help

These tweets purporting to send Meek Mill to the writing center rely upon a powerful myth that writing center personnel have spent decades fighting—that

writing centers are for weak writers and weak writing. To whomever will listen, we insist that good writers go to the writing center because 1) they understand that smart peers can provoke new possibilities and 2) they understand that "getting stuck" is not a sign of failure but rather a sign of high standards. But the flippant tweets about Meek indicate that students on Twitter continue to perceive writing center visits as a sign of weakness.

Lupe Fiasco on Writing and Rapping

Drake's diss track polled much better than Meek Mill's diss track, but he lost me when he ridiculed Meek for getting financial and intellectual support from a woman. I agree with Michael Arceneaux, who explained that "Meek being comfortable dating someone more successful than him" is a sign of strength not weakness.

The only rapper who came out looking good during this whole feud, in my humble opinion, was Lupe Fiasco, who released a two-part message that began by saying, "I enjoy both these brothers music and find inspiration and appreciation from both of them" (Bacle). Lupe then summarized the feud by saying, "Meek Mill struck a nerve accusing Drake of having a ghostwriter and the entire rap world reacted on all sides of the fence because rap is alive" (Bacle).

Lupe turned the feud into a "teachable moment," offering a series of points about writing that align him with the "social constructionist" wing of composition studies.

- At the end of the day, for better or worse, rap is alive even if some of its greatest moments are written by ghosts. (Bacle)
- The art form is kept alive and progressive in the activities of the tens of thousands of rappers around the world who are everyday trying to think of that next witty bar. (Bacle)
- To rappers from a rapper...simply write your own rhymes as much as you can if you are able. Ghostwriting, or borrowing lines, or taking suggestions from the room has always been in rap and will always be in rap. It is nothing to go crazy over or be offended about unless you are someone who postures him or herself on the importance of authenticity and tries to portray that quality to your fans or the public at large. Then we might have a problem. Some of the most pivotal moments in rap have been ghostwritten

verses. This leads to a bigger point. Rapping is not an easy thing to do. It's takes years of work and trial and error to master some of its finer points. (Bacle)

Lupe's words encapsulate what I learned during fifteen years of working in writing centers: 1) good writers acknowledge that writing is hard and therefore they look to their peers for aid in writing and 2) even writers who insist on flying solo are boosted up by the efforts of past and present others.

If Lupe's writing philosophy gained more traction, then "You oughtta go to the writing center" could no longer function as a diss. Unfortunately, though, I encountered the "remedial" understanding of writing centers many times in the month that I surveilled Twitter. For example, in his list of #TenThingsNotToSayToAWriter, one student listed "Try tutoring at the writing center." After learning of a class requirement to visit his school's writing center, a different student tweeted, "The worst part is I don't even want help. Prof. Made it a requirement to have our final essays approved by the writing center." Another student wore it as a badge of honor that he's "never even been in the writing center" and "didn't know we had one." Yet another student felt bittersweet about his frequent visits to the Writing Center: "I go to the writing center so much they know me by name and get excited by my presence. It's sad and flattering at the same time."

Conclusion

Although Meek and Drake were on different sides of the feud, they both operated from the same premise that getting help with writing is a sign of weakness. It is a premise that seems to dominate the discursive spaces (like Twitter) where teachers and administrators are not present. Lupe Fiasco's opposing belief, that getting help with writing is not only wise but inevitable, appears to be much less influential. Writing center practitioners can relate: we have insisted for decades that writing centers are not a "penalty box" for weak writers with middling success (Grimm 1996; Harris 2000; Sewell 2016).

How might these insights from Twitter affect writing center practices? More study is clearly needed, but my brief surveillance of Twitter has inspired me to rethink writing center hiring practices. If we really subscribe to Lupe's belief that good writers seek out help, we should insist on recruiting predominantly from the pool of students who frequent the writing center, those with a proven history of seeking help. Geller et al. offer a similar perspective on hiring and

recruitment in *The Everyday Writing Center*. One way to build a diverse and inclusive staff, they argue, is by paying attention "to our dedicated writing center users who have already proven through their actions that they are committed to the mission of the writing center" (Geller et al. 110).

To put it in the terms of the feud I summarized earlier, writing centers should avoid hiring those like Drake (who see getting help, especially from a woman, as a sign of weakness), even when they possess deft verbal powers and outstanding charisma. Instead, recruit those like Lupe Fiasco, who sincerely enjoy *getting* help as much as they enjoy *giving* it. And once our staffs are composed primarily of students who seek help, we can advertise this state of affairs to students, faculty, administrators, and whoever else will listen.

In fact, many writing centers already hire students who initially come seeking help. One USC student expressed confusion about this on Twitter:

- If I had to go to the writing center to get help why would USC think I'd be a good writing tutor

As this tweet indicates, writing centers are already recruiting their staff members from the students who come for consultation. At my previous institution, our writing center recruited about half of its staff in this manner. However, if we are determined to end the diss-power of "You oughtta go to the writing center," half the staff might not be enough.

Notes

1. I prefer not to cite the authors of these Tweets. Even though these students published their comments in a public space, I don't think they intended to have these comments circulated in a forum where professors and administrators gather. Ethically speaking, I think it is better to withhold students' pseudonyms.

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